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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 000567

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DEPT FOR SCA (PERRY), EUR/ACE (ADAMS)

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TAGS: [EAID](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN'S GOOD AND BAD COPS MEET STATE'S ASSISTANCE COORDINATOR

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Jennifer L. Brush, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) On May 19, EUR/ACE Coordinator Tom Adams, USAID Regional Coordinator Christopher Crowley, EUR/ACE Central Asian Desk Officer John McKane (who were in Ashgabat to participate in post's recent assistance review - ICAR), and Charg Brush met with Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov and Deputy Prime Minister (and Minister of Health) Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, and Education Minister Shemshat Annagylyjova to discuss USG assistance programs in Turkmenistan. While thanking Meredov and Berdimuhamedov for their cooperation in facilitating USG assistance in Turkmenistan, EUR/ACE Coordinator Adams reiterated USG concerns with GOTX interference with USG assistance programs and the continued overall decline in the socio-economic situation in Turkmenistan. While Meredov and Berdimuhamedov offered to streamline communication between the Ministry of Education with post and sign the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to formally recognize USAID's regional HIV/AIDS program (CAPACITY) in Turkmenistan, Meredov (more diplomatically) and Berdimuhamedov (more colorfully) repeated the usual mantra that USG assistance is welcome, albeit on GOTX terms. End Summary.

GOOD COP: FM MEREDOV

¶12. (C) EUR/ACE Coordinator Adams, joined by Charge and EUR/ACE Central Asia Desk Officer John McKane, informed FM Meredov that he and his staff had come to Turkmenistan to learn about how USG assistance programs are benefiting Turkmenistan, and to gauge the possibilities of improving assistance programs here in the future. While post advocated increasing the amount of USG assistance from its currently levels of 5.5 million USD (the lowest amount received in Europe/Eurasia), Adams said there was a widespread perception in Washington that the GOTX neither supported nor appreciated USG assistance. Although high level GOTX interlocutors say that the GOTX welcomes assistance, lower level bureaucrats oppose our efforts. In addition, Adams said, the USG was very concerned about decreasing economic, social and health conditions in Turkmenistan. He presented Meredov with the findings of EUR/ACE's 2005 Economic and Democratic Reform report that showed Turkmenistan falling far behind its neighbors in health, education, computerization, and

democratization. These trends led to increased concern about the future of Turkmenistan. One area of particular concern was the level of drug demand in Turkmenistan, which as in other Central Asian countries was particularly high. Coordinator Adams queried Meredov about his interest in cooperating to establish a USAID program to address drug demand.

¶13. (C) Meredov thanked Coordinator Adams for coming, saying that it was very important for visitors from Washington to come to Turkmenistan and learn about the country in person. Meredov said that the GOTX was already experienced in combating drugs. Charge interjected that while the GOTX had provided information about seizure statistics, it has done nothing to address drug demand reduction in Turkmenistan. Meredov agreed and offered to return to the issue at a later date.

¶14. (C) Meredov replied that the GOTX placed high importance on USG assistance programs. He cited for example the 29 USAID programs that were active in Turkmenistan in 2006, noting that this number represented an increase in USAID programs that were active in 2005 (25). He said that the issue was not so much the number of programs, but their activities and their positive impact on society. Meredov noted USAID's programs to improve health, ecology, education, adding that the GOTX and USAID were now discussing expanding USAID's economics assistance programs. Meredov dismissed EUR/ACE's findings as inaccurate, explaining that the GOTX heavily invested in time, money and manpower to improve these sectors. Thanks to the Great Leader's policies, he said, Turkmenistan was well ahead of its neighbors in terms of economic and social development. Meredov added that the MFA was always ready and willing to facilitate communication between the embassy and relevant GOTX ministries, noting that in terms of security issues, the embassy was able to communicate directly with relevant bodies rather than going through the MFA. (Comment: Not true, DAO, NVNG, EXBS, and

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INL conduct all of their business through diplomatic notes.
End Comment.)

¶15. (C) Coordinator Adams said that closer and direct contact between post and individual GOTX ministries would benefit both post and the GOTX since it would significantly reduce the amount of red tape and save valuable time. He hoped in particular that post would be able to work closer with the Ministry of Education in order to resolve many ongoing issues. He noted that the Ministry of Education-U.S. Embassy working group had yet to identify two schools for the PEAKS program, and was prevented from actively working due to the fact that it is impossible for the group to meet without getting prior MFA approval. Coordinator Adams also raised USG concern with the GOTX closure of two regional IATP centers. Meredov said that the working group was intended to do just that, to serve as a direct means for the Ministry of Education and post to contact one another and promised Charge and Coordinator Adams that from now on post could contact the Ministry of Education directly regarding all future working group matters without sending a diplomatic note. Meredov also promised to look into the IATP center closures. (Comment: We'll try for direct contact with MOE but are skeptical, Charge has been asking repeatedly about IATP Centers since the Adams visit, with no response, and in the meantime local authorities are requesting that the American Corner in Turkmenbashy close. End Comment.)

¶16. (C) Returning to the EUR/ACE findings, Coordinator Adams attributed Turkmenistan's inability to improve society to the GOTX's refusal to permit civil society participation in developing Turkmenistan. He urged Meredov to help increase the number of registered NGOs in a more time efficient manner, including Project Hope, whose registration was imperative should Turkmenistan wish to benefit from the Global Fund. Meredov said that the GOTX sought to involve

NGOs in developing society, albeit those (read Governmental NGOs or GONGOS) that are already registered with the Ministry of Justice.

BAD COP: DEPUTY PM BERDIMUHAMMEDOV

¶17. (U) In response to Adams, introduction, Berdimuhamedov suggested that GOTX-USG cooperation in health and education sectors should receive the &highest grades.⁸ However, he noted that there were several questions currently under discussion that needed to be resolved before the Ministry of Education could decide whether USAID's PEAKS program was appropriate for Turkmenistan (Note: this issue has been &under discussion⁸ in various forums since it was launched in other Central Asian countries in 2003. End note.) Turning to health, he noted that all health programs were going well, and specifically referred to joint successes in combating tuberculosis, equipping blood transfusion stations, and training of health care workers in family medicine.

¶18. (U) Berdimuhamedov confirmed that the GOTX intended to submit applications to the Global Fund by the August 3 deadline. (Note: Last year, the GOTX failed to submit any applications due to an inability to make necessary political revisions by the deadline. End note.) He acknowledged, but did not commit, the GOTX to approving current USAID implementing partner Project HOPE as the Principal Recipient in the event of a successful Global Fund application.

¶19. (U) In response to Adams, question regarding a possible date for signing an MOU to launch USAID's HIV/AIDS project (CAPACITY) in Turkmenistan, Berdimuhamedov declared that the GOTX was &ready⁸ to sign, but that it must follow protocol and be submitted via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). (Note: The MOU was subsequently submitted on May 22, 2006. End note.)

¶10. (U) Returning to the question of USAID's PEAKS project, Adams expressed disappointment that the April 28 meeting of the joint GOTX-USG Education Working Group failed to identify the two schools for it to begin working in, per his request in a January 31 meeting with USAID Regional Coordinator Crowley. Backtracking significantly, Berdimuhamedov advised that "education is not healthcare,⁸ and that there remained several outstanding issues. He also suggested that future discussions between USAID and MOE be held informally, without going through the MFA, as has been standard practice. Ominously, he emphatically stated that the last word on determining whether this program is appropriate for Turkmenistan lay with the Minister of Education. (Note: The Minister of Education - the third in as

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many years - is a weak figure, though present during the meeting, she contributed nothing. End note.)

¶11. (U) After acknowledging recent steps taken to combat Avian Influenza (AI), Adams encouraged Berdimuhamedov to take further actions to raise public awareness and asked how potential supplemental funds for education might best be applied. Berdimuhamedov asked for technical specialists on public awareness, and advised that the GOTX would organize relevant seminars. Additionally, Berdimuhamedov asked for laboratory equipment for proposed welayat (province) level laboratories. Recognizing the CDC Regional Coordinator was currently in Turkmenistan, Adams agreed that specific options would be discussed following his visit.

INFLEXIBLE ON FLEX

¶12. (U) Thanking Berdimuhamedov for MOE support on the upcoming embassy-sponsored International Teachers of English

Conference (ITEC), Adams shifted to the problem related to the number of students allowed to participate in the USG FLEX high-school exchange program. This year, the USG could fund 65 students, up from last year's 50 participants.

Berdimuhammedov quickly objected to the increase, which he claimed was based on an agreement that permitted up to 50 students per year. He insisted that no more than 50 participants would be allowed this year unless the candidates were approved by the Ministry of Education for their "purity of Turkmen mentality." Adams explained that the funding guidelines established by the U.S. Congress mandated an independent selection process, and reserved final authority for the committee, rather than host country bodies.

Berdimuhammedov was adamant that the MOE should approve the students and in response to Charge's objection that this violated the congressional funding regulations and threatened the very existence of the program at all, just shrugged.

¶13. (C) To Adams, entreaties that the number of participants be increased, Berdimuhammedov allowed this was possible, although a separate issue, but insisted) for a third time) that the MOE must approve candidates. Asked why, he responded that the MOE has reasons, &some of which we don't want to say8 but said &some have had parents put in prison8 (Note: Post is not aware of such candidates. End note.). As a potential compromise, Berdimuhammedov proposed that the current group of 50 &approved8 students be allowed to travel and offered to re-advertise for the 15 additional slots. In closing the issue, he stated that if the USG would not re-announce competition for the extra 15 slots, only 50 students will participate this year. Charge said she was unaware of the existence of any written agreement setting the limit at 50 and said the embassy would search its files. (Comment: This FLEX kabuki takes place every year.

Nothing/rpt/nothing is in writing regarding limits, Berdimuhammed outright lied. Embassy intends to proceed with the recruitment and send the 65 finalists. As it has in the past, we expect GOTX to blink at the last minute and allow the students to travel. End Comment.)

¶14. (U) Highlighting that Turkmenistan has the lowest internet penetration in Central Asia, Adams said the USG was helping Turkmenistan to redress this shortcoming via its Internet Access and Training Program (IATP). Thus, he expressed disappointment at the recent closure of centers in Dashoguz and Balkanabad cities. Berdimuhammedov professed no knowledge of the reported closures, but suggested that it was due to a misunderstanding since the GOTX supported the internet centers and had its own program to get Turkmenistan on-line.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Embassy was pleased to provide the EUR/ACE office the opportunity to witness first hand our challenges in doing business in Turkmenistan. In addition to the above two official meetings, EUR/ACE visited a number of recipients of U.S. assistance and saw the positive impact on society and attitudes toward the United States that this assistance provides.

¶16. (C) EUR/ACE visitors were able to witness both Meredov smarmily glossing over any differences, even resorting to mendacity to cover up the real lack of GOTX cooperation; as well as Berdimuhammedov displaying open hostility to U.S. programs, in particular FLEX, and demonstrating GOTX resolve

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to obstruct whenever and wherever possible. End Comment.
BRUSH